



## Transforming Identity Conflicts

### Peace Practitioners' Research Conference 2013

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#### Background

Conflict dynamics and security threats between and within Asian states are both multi-layered and diverse in nature. This conference will focus on identity-based conflicts within Asia at the inter-state, intra-state and community level.

Identity can be defined as a psychological sense of self (Northrup, 1989:55-82). It is believed to be socially (and politically) constructed, dynamic in nature and constantly changing. Each of us has many identities generated by our interactions with others; our family, community, organizations and nation. We also belong to various identity groups that define themselves in many ways, for instance in terms of religion, ethnicity, social class, language, gender and age. When identities are fixed and unable to change, they are considered closed or bounded. This is often the starting point for conflicting behavior between different and opposed identity groups.

Conflicts between identity groups are often referred to as **identity-based conflicts** (Rothman-1997:6). These are based in people's psychology, culture, basic values, shared history, and beliefs. Causes for conflicts between identity groups can be manifold. Often, deprivation, marginalization or exclusion of persons, groups or communities based on identity-labels leads to frustration and creates deep grievances, which risk ending in violence between identity groups.

Often **ethnic identity** is seen as the dominant axis around which identity-based (violent and non-violent) conflicts evolve. The existence of an identity group defined in terms of ethnicity does not itself imply conflict. It is when ethnic features become politicized (and institutionalized) that they acquire a key role in a conflict process (Ropers, 1995:1). Ropers emphasizes in this context that one should rather use the term **ethnopolitical conflict** instead of ethnic conflict.

**Religious identity** is often elided with ethnicity but also plays a key role in today's identity-based conflicts. Identity groups defined by religion are often targeted by political leaders for instrumentalization and manipulation and as a consequence become an important feature of conflict.

#### *Identity formation and transformation*

Regardless of its nature, conflict often reshapes identities and re-orders social status in post-conflict settings. For example, resistance fighters whose identities have previously been defined by their resistance efforts against a regime during conflict suddenly see their identity questioned when fighting stops. Not only is their social status challenged but they also need to develop new skills in order to re-integrate into civilian life in the post-conflict era.

#### **1. Inter-state nationalism**

At the inter-state level, identity conflict can manifest itself as un-interrogated hyper-**nationalism**. Such nationalism is often a post-colonial response to a serious imbalance of power globally and an increase in territorial conflict regionally. At present, such nationalist behavior sparked by an increase in territorial conflict can be observed in the Asia region where long-standing disputes flare to the surface; for example the bitter dispute between China and Japan over the strategically important islands in the East Chinese Sea. Also territories in the South Chinese Sea, a region rich in oil, gas, fishing and mineral resources are hotly disputed between several Asian nations and the risk of conflict escalation with unforeseeable regional or even global consequences is high.

Also other recent events in the region, such as the invasion of Sabah in Malaysia- based on ancient territorial sovereignty claims - by the descendants of the Philippines-based Sulu Sultanate, have given rise to nationalist rhetoric and confrontational behavior.

The above dynamics provide an example for how easily national identities are considered to be wounded by “outsiders” leading to the strengthening of nationalist sentiments within countries. This in turn reinforces inter-state tensions based on conflicting national identities and related territorial claims, and can threaten regional stability, cooperation and peace.

## **2. Intra-state, ethnic and religious conflict and successful diversity management**

Within their territories, states often manage diverse identity groups through policy decisions and resource distribution. States can foster conflict by an exclusive and manipulative approach to diversity management, for example by distributing power unequally, by instrumentalizing identity groups, or by attributing privileges only to certain identity-groups. On the other hand, through an inclusive approach to diversity management, for example by allowing different identity-groups equal access to education or by handling the distribution of employment in a fair way, states and their institutions can foster peaceful relations between different identity-groups.

Many Asian countries manage their diverse ethnic and religious communities during times of political transition, financial crisis and the challenges caused by the continuing legacy of the *global war on terror*.

In Southeast Asia, Thailand has not yet found an adequate way to deal with separatist claims of its Muslim-majority Southern provinces, an intra-state **religious identity** conflict which has simmered for the last two years. Myanmar’s new quasi-civilian government, while engaging in dialogue with the ethnic minority non-state armed groups, is confronted with rising sectarian violence that is yet to be addressed. In South Asia, Bangladesh, political and inter-religious violence has erupted after the war crimes tribunal sentenced to death senior leaders of the country’s largest Islamic party. Also Pakistan is struggling with sectarian violence between diverse religious groups, while several shocking sexual assault cases have resulted in large-scale demonstrations and have sparked a national debate over women’s rights and social reform in India.

In other cases, tensions are close to resolution. In the Philippines, an unprecedented milestone was achieved last year by the signing of the framework agreement between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). It is likely that this will put an end to the violent **ethno-religious conflict** that the country has experienced for several decades.

The above examples show how necessary it is to find ways to successfully and constructively manage diversity. Constructive approaches to diversity management would contribute significantly to peace and stability within a country.

## **3. Transforming Identity Conflicts**

Because identity conflicts threaten people's basic and non-negotiable needs and in many cases concern their very survival, they are often intractable and extremely violent in nature. While challenging to overcome, identity conflicts **can be transformed constructively and non-violently**. How this can be achieved is a difficult question. Well thought out peace building initiatives can help to minimize the deep and often long-lasting divisions between antagonized identity-groups.

## Themes for the Conference 2013

One approach to transforming identity conflict constructively is to **focus on communalities** between groups or communities that are not based on identity-categories. By focusing on such communalities – for instance shared interests or experiences – a process of reconceptualization of identities and cultural diversity can be started. In addition, **narratives around identities** and how they are shaped play an important role. This leads to questions such as:

- **How can the (re)shaping of narratives around identities lead to a better understanding of the “other”?**
- And in positive scenarios, how can this lead to the partial (reciprocal) integration of the “other’s” identity (and in this way to a more peaceful co-existence)?
- How can this integration process lead to more peaceful and positive relationships and change attitudes and behaviors?

With these questions in mind, CPCS encourages peace practitioners to reflect upon identity issues in their work context and in the specific conflict transformation process they are engaged in. Scholars are encouraged to analyze the role of identity in the conflict context or country of their expertise.

Theme 1 or 2 can be chosen:

### 1. Addressing intra-state ethnic and religious conflict

**What are the mechanisms that help to constructively transform ethno-political and religious conflict at intra-state and/or community-level?**

The following questions might guide the analysis:

What is the role of identity in inter-communal/religious violence? What are the root causes of ethnic and religious violence in the specific conflict context and how do we find mechanisms to deal with such violence?

What community-level mechanisms can help to deconstruct identities that are fueling conflict?

Does ethnic and religious identity overlap in the specific conflict context?

Are these identities being manipulated by political or religious leaders? If yes, what are these leaders’ objectives?

What community-level mechanisms can minimize the risk of political manipulation or instrumentalisation of identity groups?

How are ethnic and religious identity defined?

### 2. Role of the state in successful diversity management

**What mechanisms help to foster peaceful coexistence of diverse identity groups in the country/context you are working in? And how does the project you are working with interface with the state’s diversity management policies?**

The following questions might guide the analysis:

How is diversity managed at the state-level and who manages it?

How is national identity defined in your country/context? Is the concept of national identity inclusive? Do minority groups feel included?

What are the formal and informal mechanisms and systems with which identities are managed? (for example laws and codes)

What role do symbols play in diversity management for different groups? (flags, colors, names, languages)

## Rationale

The 2013 conference continues the journey that began in 2012. By organizing the PPRC 2013 CPCS aims to provide a space and opportunity for reflection on and exchange of peace building theory and practice in Asia. The PPRC 2013 is intended to serve as platform for collaborative learning, for discussing and challenging the nexus between theory and practice, and for carefully thinking about how regional and local peace building approaches and practices can be improved.

**Goal:** to contribute to the enhancement and increased sustainability of peace building work in Southeast and South Asia.

## Objectives

- (1) Learn from action research and local peace building practices initiated by peace practitioners
- (2) Develop a body of knowledge from successful practice
- (3) Test existing peace building theory by applying it to specific contexts/cases
- (4) Produce and publish a learning document on the main insights of the PPRC 2013, so that wider groups in the field can learn and profit from the lessons learned

## Eligibility

Peace practitioners, researchers and scholars **from Asia and working in the region**. Participants must be **over 25 years** old.

## Submission of papers

We invite submissions of papers addressing issues related to the role of identity and conflict with a focus on Southeast and South Asia. Research papers must be new and original research which is not yet published. Practitioners and researchers interested in participating in the conference should send the following to Inanna Göbel-Bösch ([cpcsconference2013@gmail.com](mailto:cpcsconference2013@gmail.com)) by **7<sup>th</sup> September 2013**:

- Completed application form
- Short bio (name, profession, organization, field of work, motivation to participate in the PPRC- 100 words)
- Research paper abstract (300 words)
- Table of content of research paper

## Selection of papers and scholarships

- Presenters will be selected on the basis of the quality and relevance of their papers
- **Maximum 20 papers** will be selected for presentation
- **Maximum 35 participants**
- **Full coverage of local costs** (accommodation 3 nights, meals, official dinner, special event, local transportation) for 35 participants
- No coverage of airfares. **Participants must pay for their flights and travel costs.**
- **6 scholarships** available for outstanding papers (full coverage of airfare & other travel costs, full coverage of local costs)

## Date and Place

The Peace Practitioners' Research Conference 2013 is going to take place in Siem Reap, Cambodia, **from 6th to 8th December 2013**.